

B"H



*Authentic Kabbalah - Sephardic Studies
Benei Noah Studies -- Anti-Missionary/Anti-Cult Materials*

Avodah Zarah The Sin in Our Times

A Guide to What is Forbidden Idolatry

*by Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
Copyright © 1997, 2000 by Ariel Bar Tzadok. All rights reserved.*

The Definition of Idolatry

Any image or semblance of image can never correctly portray G-d. For whatever image we would ever apply to G-d or use to represent G-d is, by simple definition, grossly inadequate to represent G-d. For G-d is the Soul of all. Just as the soul is unmanifest, so is G-d. Yet, just as the soul exists and is the true driving force behind the human personality, so does G-d exist and it is He who is the driving force behind the "personality" of the universe. In other words, it is G-d who decides how all things in the universe are to be, regardless of how apparently insignificant or small. Just as the soul of the body, within the unconscious of the mind, controls each and every function within the human body, down to the microscopic level, so does G-d, concealed from sight (i.e., our human sight, as is the unconscious), control every aspect within creation.

It is this "Mind" of the universe that can never be anthropomorphized by anything within the universe. Such an act as calling this or that image a true portrayal or representation of G-d curtails G-d's true essence and as such causes a breach in G-d's unity. For whenever we wish to represent the whole of a thing by only a part of a thing, we do damage to the definition of the whole. This act of breach of unity is, as if, painful for G-d to have to suffer at our hands. An act of subdividing G-d's unity or anthropomorphizing G-d is tantamount to a spiritual act of violence against the wholeness of the "Mind" and "Being" of the universe.

Idolatry, which substitutes a part for the whole, is the classic example of this spiritual crime. Therefore, any image projected upon G-d, be it a golden calf, an image of a little old man with a white beard sitting on "cloud nine" somewhere, or the gross mistake of saying that G-d could possibly become flesh and dwell among us, is a horrible act of spiritual violence against G-d's essential unity. Such spiritual felonies are addressed by

the spiritual, Heavenly powers that be, in accordance to those spiritual laws that are the fabric and foundation of the universe.

The Sin of Idolatry

Most people today, Jew and Gentile alike, really have no idea as to just what idolatry is. According to the dictionary definition (Webster's Ninth Collegiate), idolatry is simply the worship of something physical as G-d. Most of us would, of course, laugh at such actions. No one today really worships physical items. Moreover, the physical items that many Gentile religions revere (but not outrightly worship) are acknowledged by them to be mere symbols. These icons, their priests and ministers will say, are abstract representatives of the doctrines and theology that they hold to be the one and true reality of the spiritual world. If so, then these religions aren't really worshipping the cross, a statue of Buddha or a Hindu deity. All these icons are merely symbols, and that is not idolatrous, is it? Well, maybe not according to the dictionary definition of the word idolatry. Nevertheless, the dictionary is not the source of authority to define these matters. The authoritative sources that define idolatry are the Word of G-d, the Torah and the writings of the holy Sages, the Rabbis.

According to Torah, idolatry entails a much wider definition than simply bowing down to a man created image. Idolatry consists not only of one's actions, but also of one's thoughts. This does not limit idolatry to one believing that a physical object is to be worshipped. Idolatry is a much wider category that includes an individual's spiritual outlook. Idolatry can best be defined as the deification of any created thing, be it an object, concept, philosophy or individual. The object of deification, therefore, becomes the focal point of one's life and life style. By focusing on the falsely deified thing, one thus loses focus of the True source of all, the TRUE G-D. This leads to the most devastating of results.

Idolatry can include many things, such as:

- 1. An incorrect intellectual perception of G-d and how He controls His universe that, when acted upon, leads to an imbalance between the physical and spiritual worlds*
- 2. The elevation of any created thing or person to being the sole or ultimate archetype representative of G-d.*
- 3. Viewing a created thing as having Divine significance beyond that which it truly does have.*
- 4. Calling something G-d or a representative of G-d, that is no such thing.*

All of these definitions of idolatry have to do with a person's philosophical view of the spiritual world. So what, one may ask. Big deal! Why is this such an important thing? Why should G-d care about how we view His universe? After all, if we live lives as decent human beings, why would any of us even care about idolatry?

Underlying these questions are yet others. By asking these questions, along with those above, we will finally be able to receive some necessary answers. Why is it such a devastating thing for there to be a large conglomeration of different world views and spiritual beliefs? What is so bad about viewing the world as a number of parts instead of

as an integrated whole? The answer to these questions is clear to anyone with the wisdom to be able to properly interpret the course of human events.

Let me use the military for an example. In any military corps, there is a very clearly defined and strict chain of command. Everyone knows who is their superior and who is their subordinate. The entire military operation depends upon this chain of command. When it is functioning correctly, then the entire military functions correctly. When the chain of command is weakened or broken, then the entire military crumbles. This is exactly how it is with G-d's army, which consists of His entire universe. This is why G-d is called the L-rd of Hosts. The Hebrew word for "Hosts" Tzvaot technically means "armies."

Continuing with the above example, what would happen in a scenario, when individual companies of soldiers lose sight of the fact that they are a united integrated fighting machine, and instead of swearing allegiance to their country and commander in chief, they swear allegiance to their individual generals. While each group might maintain that they are still true to country and commander, they claim, nonetheless, that it is only they who are. The other companies under other generals are either traitors or not as loyal. Regardless, of whether the individual generals have said anything to support these claims, the individual companies view it as their obligation to country and commander to properly and faithfully serve their general and to put all the other wayward companies into line. It doesn't matter if the generals speak up against this type of activity. The companies themselves know better. The generals are either testing them or they don't have as clear a picture, as do the individual companies. Therefore, it is up to the individual companies to prove to their generals that they see the greater picture. Therefore, they declare war on the other companies to bring them into line with the big picture. Of course, the problem with this course of action is that each company has its own big picture. And more than just the companies fighting with each other, it is the big pictures that are fighting with each other for the rights of being the correct one.

Whenever we as humans lose sight of our collective commander and chief, who is G-d, of our collective patriotism to our world, we then fall under the influences of lesser forces that use us to fight it out for them. World views are comprehensive and closed systems. When one views the entire world from a certain point of view, one feels that all who do not adhere to that point of view are out of sync with the "right" way. Moreover, every effort must be made in order to bring the wayward ones back into the fold. For not only do the wayward ones hurt themselves, they hurt everyone else by not seeing and acting according to the "right" big picture. This close minded attitude is exactly what developed in the children of Enosh. This system of conflict is the natural result of losing sight of the True Creator and L-rd over all.

We see this prevalent attitude of mistaken evangelism in some of the world's major religions today. Repent or you will go to hell! Believe or be damned! These are not the teachings of G-d. Nowhere in the Torah, prophets or writings is there any mention of an afterlife and the rewards or punishments therein. The reason for this is that the Bible (the real Bible, the only one, the Jewish one) deals specifically with life in this world. The

purpose of Divine revelation was (and is) to teach us humans how to build a decent and stable human society for the betterment of our race and planet.

When we subdivide into groups and forget our collective whole, then the purpose of Divine revelations is thwarted. Each group loses touch with the source and thus their world picture becomes tainted. Granted, there is definitely some truth in each of the world's religions. Nonetheless, much of those truths are clouded over and thus oblique, disabling those under such clouds from seeing the full light.

In His Infinite wisdom, G-d knows that the sin of idolatry, more than any, is the ultimate cause of all social decay and human strife. As long as there are competing worldviews, there will be competing human beings out to bring all others into what they consider the necessary truth. Needless to say that it is the underlying conflicting philosophies of nations that have been the cause of most wars throughout human history and the real cause behind most human suffering. Without a clear picture of the greater whole, each individual group (nation or people) sees itself as the best and as the center of everything. When two or more groups come into contact their underlying egos, pride and philosophies clash and cause strife.

The forbiddance of idolatry, therefore, does not mean that one or another culture or religion is bad and is thus to be abandoned. Rather, the forbiddance of idolatry means that each and every culture and race, while proudly expressing their G-d given differences, must still, nonetheless, know and acknowledge the One True L-rd of the Universe as He truly is, as opposed to whom they claim Him to be.

G-d is not the possession of any one religion, not even of the Jewish religion. It must be clearly understood that Judaism teaches, most emphatically, that G-d is not Jewish! G-d is above all the individual religions of mankind. He is equally L-rd and King over us all, regardless of what religion one believes in, or doesn't believe in. G-d exists over and above all "faces" and "masks" that people put over Him.

Granted, each and every nation has its own peculiar perception of G-d and the universe. As long as that perception is based on historical accuracy and accepts itself as a subjective part of the greater whole, and as long as there is no strange worship any angelic or demonic power(s), this form of religion might very well be acceptable under the code of the universal laws.

G-d is not so theologically demanding of us as we are of ourselves. G-d recognizes that mankind's present state of knowledge is blemished as the result from eating of the forbidden fruit. G-d knows that collective mankind does not possess the ability to perceive total spiritual clarity. This is why, even in Judaism, there are many different paths and beliefs. As long as they fit into the greater picture, all subjective views are acceptable. In the Jewish circles that are faithful to G-d's Torah covenant, no one party has a monopoly on truth.

An example of G-d's profound understanding of our fallen intellectual state is found in the Bible. The prophet Malachi, who was the last of the prophets to record his prophecy, makes a very profound proclamation in the Name of G-d. He writes (1:11):

"For from the rising of the sun until it sets, great is My Name among the Gentiles; and in every place incense is burnt and sacrifices are offered to My Name and a pure offering, for great is My Name among the Gentiles, says the L-rd of Hosts."

G-d is saying here that the Gentiles, who offer to Him "pure offerings", honor His Name. Yet, historically speaking this is very confusing. At the time that G-d spoke these words to His prophet Malachi, the children of Israel were just returning from the Babylonian exile (approx. 400 B.C.E.). At this time in history, who on earth knew about the G-d of Israel, even more so, which of the Gentiles would make offerings to Him? Nowhere in recorded history do we have any overt mention of what would have been known as Jewish beliefs and practices being known anywhere in the world outside of the immediate vicinity of where the Jewish people lived. What on earth then is G-d talking about? Certainly, the Gentiles of 400 B.C.E. did not know Him, His Torah or His people. Who then are these gentiles and what exactly was it that they were doing?

We do not have to struggle for answers to these questions for our holy Rabbis provide them for us. The great Biblical commentators, Rashi, Ibn Ezra and the Malbim all relate the same teaching as to the meaning of Malachi's words.

These commentators note that Malachi is writing to admonish the children of Israel returning from the Babylonian exile to be sincere in their offerings to G-d and not to just practice them by rote. G-d admonishes the Jewish people by saying, "look to the Gentile nations, see how they offer to their idols. They offer from the depths and truth in their hearts. Although they offer to this or that idol, angel or force of nature, deep in their hearts they know that there is the G-d of G-ds, who is L-rd of L-rds and that is Me." In essence, G-d accepts the idolatrous offering of the Gentile, who although his intellect is mistaken, his heart is in the right place.

This is a most profound thing! This one proof text totally negates separatist religious philosophies such as Christianity and Islam. These religions teach that all must believe in them or suffer the wrath of an avenging G-d. Yet, here we have G-d's own Word saying that one's doctrinal beliefs, which come from the blemished intellect, do not matter, as long as one's heart is properly in line with the One Truth.

[You can order our recorded lecture series on The Book of the Prophet Malakhi from our online store.](#)

G-d is so gracious and understanding. Even with regards to idolatry, the most base evil, because it can undermine human cohesiveness, G-d is merciful, as long as the individual is able to transcend the individual differences and see G-d's underlying truth through the veils of the individual religions. Granted not every Gentile was able to do this. Some, then and now, believe that their religion is the only right way, and that all

others are "damned to Hell." This, then is not a "pure offering." These separatists are not the ones to whom G-d is referring. Even today, when the majority of the world knows of and reads our Bible, G-d still judges us by what is in our hearts and not exclusively by what is in our heads. Idolatry is, therefore, not only something that you do, it is something that you believe.

What then must a Gentile believe with regards to religion? Over 5,000 years have past since Adam; there are now many different religions with thousands of years of history. What is a Gentile to do? Must he/she give up all different ethnicity and cultures and start acting like Jews? This question has already been answered. No! A Gentile most certainly does not have to give up his/her culture in order to fulfill G-d's command to forbid idolatry.

What must be given up, however, are two things; first: all historical inaccuracies and lies; second: all worship of an intermediary. Yet, there is still one more form of idolatry that in many cases is the worst of all and this is the worship (or acceptance) of determinism, which is the underlying philosophy of the occult.

Idolatry and the Prohibition Against the Occult

Many times people, Jew and Gentile alike, desire to peer beyond the boundaries of our physical world and grab a peak at the spirit world. Many wish to contact the spirits, practice divinations or practice wicca and witchcraft, all for the sake of manipulating spiritual forces for one's earthly good. Included in this and most popular are all forms of fortune telling and predicting the future. Nothing gets G-d angrier than this!

All these actions and those similar to them are nothing more than human denial of G-d's direct control over individual human lives. In spite of the fact that G-d very intimately controls every minute detail in creation, there is allotted room to the manifestations of human free will. In other words, no matter what is decreed, by either G-d or by one of His ministering angels, everything has the potential to be changed. There is no such thing as determinism. Even what the eastern religions call karma is not an absolute law according to the Torah. Granted, in accordance to your investment will come your reward (what you sow is what you reap), but even this is under the hand of G-d and can be changed!

The whole purpose of human existence is for the sake of spiritual evolution. Although G-d has ordained His universe to be operated under the authority of His law, nonetheless, human souls operate under the authority of a higher law; a law of spirit and a law of love. Whenever someone practices fortune telling or predicting the future, all that can be ascertained is the natural outcome of present human events. There is no way to take into account the Hand of the Living G-d, Who may intervene at any moment that He so desires. Whenever someone accepts the results of fortune telling or of a prediction, they have locked out all other potential futures. This is, as if, chopping off G-d's Hand. Nothing is more destructive to the world than the black and white attitude that unyielding merciless law ruthlessly controls everything. So when Karma says, whatever be your fate, you will not escape it; Torah says, oh, yes, you can!

Occultic philosophy detaches itself from G-d and attempts to persuade the spirits, angelic and demonic forces to act beneficially with humans for the sake of physical, material benefit. Why do the practitioners of these black arts not turn to G-d with these requests? Simply because their actions and hearts are evil and they will not succeed in supplicating G-d's grace. Therefore, they turn to the agents of evil in order to satiate their cravings for power.

Whatever is a person's due, they most certainly will get. However, this is not karma. It is simply G-d's grace. Yet, when an evil is performed rectification can be accomplished through the act of returning penitently to G-d, confessing one's crime, making appropriate restitution when applicable and asking forgiveness from the offended party. If all this is done, then this is proper repentance. Karma is thereby neutralized. One has created for himself an entirely new world.

Many of the world's religions have yet to learn about the intervention of G-d's grace. Many religions are still very superstitious regarding the placating of this or that spirit. Many religions still teach to direct prayer to sources other than G-d. This issue must be appropriately explored.

Idolatry and the Religions of the World

The one thing that has distinguished Judaism from the other religions of the world has been the fact that Torah forbids there to be any image of G-d. In ancient times, the Jews were known to be the people of the "invisible" G-d, whose Hand was felt, but whose Face was never seen.

Most religions today each have an image, which they hold to be the sacred image that represents the Divine. The Christians have the cross, Yeshu or Mary. The Hindus have a pantheon of gods, which include the elephant head Ganesh, the multi-armed Shiva, Kali and many more. The Buddhists have an equal number of Buddhas, each one representing one or another attribute. Many of the Native American tribes have their animal totems. Each race, each people, each culture has its own visible view of what, for the Torah and the Jew, is invisible.

There was once an occasion when the Jewish people wished to have a physical image to represent G-d. Their attempts at making such an image did not meet with Divine favor. The image that was made to represent G-d was the golden calf. This story is documented in Exodus 32:1-14. Make no mistake; the golden calf was not an image of an Egyptian deity. After witnessing the ten plagues, the parting of the Sea, the epiphany at Mt. Sinai and hearing the Divine Voice give the ten commandments, no one including the Egyptians who had joined Israel, was calling upon some has-been Egyptian god. The language of the Bible story clearly states that the people asked Aaron the priest to make them an image of Elokim, which is G-d's title. Needless to say, G-d was so angry with the people that if not for the intercession of Moses, the people would have been destroyed.

What is learned from this episode is that G-d does not tolerate religious superstition or mythology from those who should know better. After witnessing what Israel had witnessed in Egypt, the mere thought of projecting onto G-d an image or "Face" was not an option. The second commandment accurately states this. In English, it is translated as; "You shall have no other gods before me." (Ex.20:3). Actually a correct translation should read, "You shall have no other gods upon my Face."

G-d had ordained that the Jewish people be above the need to portray G-d with an image that is merely a human projection. G-d, and thus His Image is above any and every culture, race or religion. G-d wanted Israel to recognize G-d as who He is without image, without form. This is one lesson that Israel was (and is) to teach the nations. Therefore, as we look upon the world religions, we must ask how is the Divine represented in that religion? The answer to this will define whether or not aspects of different religions are to be considered as idolatrous and thus forbidden to Gentile and Jew alike.

While there are many philosophical and metaphysical teachings within eastern religions that are of the highest spiritual caliber, most share the idolatrous practice of worshiping idols. Whether it be this or that image of Buddha or the many within the pantheon of Hinduism, all of these images, whether they be actual portrayals of spiritual entities, or whether they are simply archetypal projections of the collective unconscious, they all, nonetheless, fall short of the spiritual vision that G-d requires of all His children. They are all idolatrous images and therefore, even a gentile is forbidden to worship them.

All acts of worship or service to any of these images and their shrines violate the first universal law prohibiting idolatry. Many of the followers of these paths, however, are sincere and reverent seekers of the truth who perform these ceremonies because this is what they have been taught. Many of these eastern monks (and nuns) are extremely pious and spiritual people. It is of these that the prophet Malachi spoke saying G-d's Name is great among the Gentiles. When these eastern monks and nuns will be given the opportunity to see the Hand of the Living G-d, they will easily abandon all forms of spiritual immaturity dealing with idols and images. Their time will come with the dawn of the messianic age.

The major source of idolatry in today's world is not the eastern religions, but rather from the world's largest religion, Christianity. Claiming to be an offshoot and "fulfillment" of Judaism, Christianity has gone worldwide in manipulating conversions, many times at the point of sword or gun. In their path for over 1,700 years, countless hundreds of thousands and most likely millions have been massacred as evil heathen and associates of the devil. The sign of the cross, which originally was a sign of Jewish martyrdom before the Romans, quickly turned into a sign of religious persecution and death brought on the Jews by the Church. Christianity claims itself to be the religion of love but has manifest nothing but hatred and prejudice to those who do not accept its teachings. Regardless of the Yeshu issue, this dark history of the Church makes it the most evil man-made empire in human history.

The Church, as is known, claims to be the disciples of one Yeshu HaNotzri, whose Jewish name was changed to become Jesus Christ. They claim that G-d Himself came down to earth, took on human flesh, lived a human life and died. Whoever then accepts these claims and lives in accordance to these beliefs is considered righteous before G-d. Whoever rejects these doctrines is considered evil before G-d, a cohort of the devil and an inheritor of Hell.

The problem with this and most everything else that the Church teaches is that it has no foundation whatsoever in the teachings of the Bible. To avoid this obvious flaw, Christianity invented its own Bible, and then proceeded to totally pervert the authoritative teachings of the guardians of the true Bible, the holy Rabbis. The Jewish Bible was completely misinterpreted. Sections of scripture were claimed to be messianic prophecies fulfilled by Yeshu, when in reality they were not messianic prophecies at all. Christianity also invented its own Triune G-d: the so-called Father, Son (Yeshu), and the Holy Ghost. The mythological character of this and other stories that have come to surround Yeshu is historical inaccuracy and idolatry at its worst. I know that I have made this point countless times but it is necessary for me to be repetitive. There is no other way to reach those who have been so indoctrinated by Christian teachings.

Some modern Christian theologians will admit that much of Christianity has its origins in pagan Greek, Roman and Persian mythology. The fundamentalists, of course, consider any challenge to their doctrines as a satanic deception. I remember once speaking to a Catholic friend sharing with her the fact that December 25th (Christmas day) could not possibly have been the birth date of Yeshu, if the account in the Gospel of Luke is to be accepted as factual. Luke records that shepherds were sleeping out in the fields with their flocks and angels awakened them with song to announce Yeshu's birth. Aside from the mythological nature of this tale, anyone who has ever been in Bethlehem in late December knows that it gets very cold out at nights, many times down into the 20's or lower. Who on earth is sleeping outside in such inclement weather, along with their flocks? Both shepherd and flock would freeze to death by morning. Rather than accept the logic of my story, this friend answered me with violence and anti Semitic accusations. Needless to say, we are no longer friends.

This example proves my point of the divisive nature of idolatrous beliefs. When the truth be heard, the truth be damned, if it doesn't agree with doctrine. There are too many falsehoods within Christianity to enumerate here. I know many a Christian reader will feel threatened by what I have written here. I apologize for causing you discomfort. I do not apologize for telling you the truth.

Many a Christian, who are blind to the Jewish truths of the Bible are, nonetheless, true G-d fearing and G-d loving people. My critique of the Christian religion is not, in any way, to be interpreted as a condemnation of Christian individuals. In spite of their mistaken beliefs in Yeshu and the Church, many modern days Christians, from fundamentalists to Mormons, are some of the most righteous people on the face of the earth. I applaud their devotion, faith and commitment to what they believe to be the true word of G-d. In spite of their mistaken beliefs, I am sure, as Malachi 1:11 said, that G-

d's Name is truly great among them. Personally speaking, I can't wait until the real Mashiah comes so that the true Torah will be known by all, so that we can all get together, righteous Gentile and righteous Jew, as servants of G-d and together perform our spiritual service.

In spite of the goodness of many Christian individuals, Christianity as a religion has been a scourge on mankind since its inception. Its false claim to usurp Torah Judaism is clearly fraudulent. Yet, they are not the only ones to make such a claim. Another religion arose, following yet another "prophet," which claims to be the true and final word of G-d. This religion is Islam.

In my opinion, Islam is the most interesting of the Gentile religions. Starting in the 5th century C.E. Muhammad the founder of Islam claimed that his "prophecies" from the angel Gabriel were G-d's greatest and final prophecies for mankind. Like Christianity before him, Muhammad declared that Islam was the true meaning and interpretation of not only Judaism, but also of Christianity. As Christianity attempted to usurp Judaism, Islam came along to usurp both of them. Somewhere in this, I see a Divine sense of humor at work.

Islam is a most interesting blend of old Judaic and pagan Arabic teachings. Some of the legends within Islam can even be traced back to ancient first century Ebionite (Jewish-Christian) cults, remnants of which still existed in the Arabian peninsula during the life of Muhammad. Most interesting is the school of Islamic mysticism known as Sufi. The whirling dervishes of this tradition would swirl around and around to music in order to reach a trace like state of rapture. The method is clearly a remnant of the singing and dancing that was used by the Biblical schools of the prophets (ref. 1Sam.10:10). However, Islam's most holiest shrine, the Ka'ba of Mecca is nothing more than an old idolatrous shrine used for centuries by pagan Arabs. As the Christians had to accommodate certain pagan practices into Christianity in order to receive wide support from the masses, so Islam had to do the same thing.

Aside from the Ka'ba worship and the clear contradictions between the Koran and the Bible, Islam does fulfill the universal directive of worshiping G-d without any image or form. In fact, the great Torah sage Maimonides, while condemning Mohammed's so-called prophecies, does not consider the religion of Islam to be at all idolatrous. Like, Israel, the Moslems have adopted a form of Oral law, which they strictly live by. Many Islamic laws are very similar to those in Jewish law. Yet, with regards to idolatry, with the exception of the Ka'ba, Moslems are closest to the universal truth of G-d's holy Torah.

Conclusion

Idolatry, indeed, is a human psychological phenomenon, which becomes manifest in all forms of peculiar religious practices and Divine projections.

All of these aberrations undermine human psychological stability and growth potential. This is why idolatry is sin #1 of all sins.

Without a firm internal psychological framework, how is mankind ever to build an external stable social environment?